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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000184

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#) [MY](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN THAILAND: READOUT ON ABHISIT-NAJIB, LOCAL
EMPOWERMENT

REF: A. BANGKOK 3171 (More on Malaysian Angle)
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 3104 (Najib's Visit)
[1](#)C. CHIANG MAI 171 (Skeptical Army Leadership)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, CG, ConGen, Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. (S) During a joint visit to southern Thailand by the Thai and Malaysian Prime Ministers, PM Abhisit reportedly raised with PM Najib - indirectly - RTG concern over official Malaysian pressure on Malaysia-based insurgent leaders involved in secret peace talks with the RTG. In a post-Najib-visit meeting with staff, one participant reported that Abhisit also said he would welcome a proposal by the insurgents for greater local empowerment in the deep South, provided it allowed for Buddhists to coexist freely with the Muslim majority there. The structure and specifics of local empowerment will likely be pursued in the next round of talks, which are not currently scheduled but could take place as early as mid-January.

[1](#)2. (S) Comment: Time will tell whether Abhisit's roundabout private message to Najib will ultimately ease pressure by its security organs on Malaysia-based insurgent leaders involved in the secret talks with the RTG. On the issue of granting a greater local voice in governance in the deep South - long on the table as an essential element for ending the conflict there - a great deal of work lies ahead for both sides to turn current, politically loaded buzzwords like "autonomy" into specific proposals for administering local governments, courts, schools, and other civic institutions. End Summary and Comment.

Abhisit Confronts Najib - Sort Of

13. (S) Consul General met December 18 in Chiang Mai with Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace and RTG point-man for secret talks with southern insurgents facilitated by the Henri Dunant Centre (HDC). Tamthai provided brief updates on developments since Malaysian PM Najib's December 8-9 visit to southern Thailand (Refs A and B) and the latest round of talks in Manila in early November (Ref C).

14. (S) Tamthai had recently returned from a December 16 meeting in Bangkok with PM Abhisit during which Tamthai and (unnamed) others had sought a readout from Abhisit on his discussions with Najib during their joint visit to the South. In particular, participants wanted to know what Abhisit, in private discussions with Najib, had said on the vexing issue of official Malaysian pressure on Malaysia-based insurgent leaders involved in the secret dialogue. According to Tamthai, Abhisit said he had raised the matter indirectly by saying that while the RTG saw the insurgency as an internal Thai matter, it appreciated any steps by the GOM to facilitate RTG efforts to address the problem. Tamthai expressed to us some unease with the broad and vague formulation that Abhisit chose to use, but added that Najib probably understood what Abhisit was driving at since the matter of GOM meddling had been raised the week before with aides to Najib during a trip to Kuala Lumpur by an Abhisit envoy (Ref A). As for how Najib would respond to Abhisit's roundabout request, Tamthai said "we'll see."

Advancing the Local Empowerment Concept

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15. (S) Another topic reportedly discussed during the December 16 internal meeting was the concept of granting a greater local voice in governance in the South as an essential element to ending the conflict. According to Tamthai, Abhisit said he supported local empowerment as long as it left space for Buddhists to coexist freely in the Muslim-majority South, and would be willing to consider a specific proposal from the insurgent leaders. Tamthai noted to us that public momentum was building across Thailand for greater local empowerment in the South and was being openly and regularly discussed in workshops and academic fora. He added that various civil society organizations and Southern student groups were circulating in the deep South to solicit the general public's thoughts on local empowerment. He believes the time is ripe for the RTG to comment publicly on the matter, and expressed disappointment that Abhisit did not do so during his tour of the South with Najib.

16. (S) Tamthai sees local empowerment as a leading agenda item for the next round of secret talks, which he hopes will take place in mid-January. He wants to push the insurgent representatives to develop a proposal, but admitted that to date they have given little thought to the structure and details that would follow their frequent calls for "autonomy." Tamthai would like to see the next round of talks produce a "tasking" to the dialogue's nascent academic Study Group (Ref C) to hammer out the details of a local empowerment proposal for administering the three southernmost provinces.

CBMs: Little Movement

17. (S) Tamthai gave brief updates on several confidence-building measures that have long been on the table during the secret talks:

-- June 8 mosque attack investigation. Continued lack of progress continues to frustrate Abhisit greatly. (Note: to date, only one arrest warrant has been issued, and no arrests have been made).

-- Prisoner release. The highly complex royal pardon route has been dropped. Tamthai is now exploring whether an amnesty provision in a recent Cabinet-approved measure on security in four districts in Songkhla province could be extended to the three provinces where the insurgency is focused, and then applied to the prisoners in question. He cautioned that this would be a lengthy process at best.

-- Ceasefire. On-again off-again plans for a ceasefire are on again. Tamthai reported that the insurgent participants in the secret dialogue are working on declaring a unilateral ceasefire for a finite period over a broad area. Should this come to realization, he said the RTG would need to prepare an appropriate response in the form of its own unilateral steps, such as a partial troop withdrawal.

18. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
MORROW